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ABSTRACT

The controversy over two approaches to writing instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL), product and process orientations, is reviewed based on articles appearing in the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages' quarterly professional journal from 1982-1991. In the process-oriented approach, instructional practices emphasize the strategies that lead the writer to the processes underlying composing and discovery of meaning; product orientation focuses on the end result of the composing process. Special attention is given to 1986 criticism of the process approach by Daniel Horowitz. It is concluded that at present the status of the debate is characterized by compromise and an integrated theory of writing that includes both process and product. (MSE)

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TESOL's Process Versus Product Debate

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TESOL's Process Versus Product Debate

An ongoing debate in English as a second language (ESL) writing instruction involves the orientation a teacher takes toward student work. On the one hand, process-oriented instructors view writing as creative, generative, cognitive, and nonlinear. Their instructional practices emphasize the strategies that lead the writer to the processes underlying composing and the discovery of meaning (Chaudron, 1987). On the other hand, product-oriented instructors focus on the end result of the composing process. The accuracy, style, organization, elegance, and coherence of the product indicate the writing ability of the student. In this paper, I will review the process versus product discussion found in the TESOL Quarterly from 1982 to 1991. Special emphasis will be given to Horowitz's (1986a) criticisms of the process approach as well as some of the reactions to his stance. Finally, the current status of the argument will be summarized.

Advocates of product-oriented writing instruction view the finished text as the single best indicator of student learning, performance, and teacher effectiveness. Pedagogy begins with a model that is studied, proceeds by introducing grammatical structures pertinent to the model, and ends with an essay utilizing those structures and organized in a manner similar to the model. The product, then, should conform to a preestablished model in a grammatical, relevant and well organized manner. In this way, the student learns to write well in whatever particular rhetorical mode has been presented. Otherwise, more instruction and practice is needed to remediate the problematic areas. Thus, the goal of instruction is a well structured, coherent, content rich, grammatical essay.

In sum, the product of writing is seen as symptomatic of the learner's ability to write.

The product approach has been criticized on the grounds that it ignores the importance of students generating their own prose without the aid of models. It is as if students only learn to copy a well written essay. Creativity is not required for a good grade; instead, the ability to regurgitate the correct structures for the appropriate forms of discourse predict writing ability. Students seem to write in a monkey-see monkey-do fashion. Yes, they can assemble the essay in accord with a prescribed pattern, but the strategies needed to create the text are lacking.

The process approach gained prominence as a reaction to product-oriented teaching. This approach is learner centered (Shih, 1986), with students developing a repertoire of writing strategies by writing to various audiences on differing topics. Content is built through brainstorming, individual reflection, group discussions, readings, lectures, and outside research. Audiences include both the teacher and other students, as well as hypothetical readers.

Topics for writing are initially chosen by the students themselves. The rationale is that writing about familiar and interesting topics will reduce anxiety and lead to optimal writing. As students' understanding of their unique writing processes matures, they gradually transfer their improving writing skills to other contexts (i.e., other audiences and less familiar topics), and with practice, they tackle the constraints of academic writing. Eventually, they realize that good writing does not just happen; it involves a process of searching for ideas, developing a topic, writing,

reading, revising, proofreading, editing, and rewriting. Throughout, the teacher facilitates the acquisition of this process by attending to the writer, not the written product (Liebman-Kleine, 1986). This gentle approach to writing facilitates the internal growth of the students' knowledge about writing strategies, and writing becomes self-generated.

The process approach gained wide acceptance among ESL writing teachers in the mid-1980's. It was credited with developing senses of audience, voice, and power in language (Urzua, 1987). It fostered creative, generative written expression organized around the search for, and discovery of, meaning (Zamel, 1983). The arguments for the process approach were convincing and its popularity rose.

In the March 1986 edition of the TESOL Quarterly, Daniel Horowitz challenged the process-oriented camp with his disparaging remarks on the subject. To Horowitz, teachers' uncritical acceptance of a relatively novel and unsubstantiated approach to writing represented the growth of a potentially dangerous dogma. His concerns were especially acute in regard to the needs of those students intending to pursue academic goals at English speaking institutions of higher learning. Although he conceded the utility of the process approach in certain situations, he discounted its value as a complete theory. In order to initiate closer scrutiny of possible pitfalls of the process approach, he discussed four major points for ESL writing instructors and researchers to consider.

First, the process approach's dependence on revision ignores the importance of essay examination writing. For this test type, students are forced to write on teacher selected topics under strict time constraints, features problematic to the notion of process. Success or failure on

these exams makes the difference between passing or failing a course, between excelling and advancing in academia or just getting by. To ignore such a critical writing skill is to do a disservice to ESL students.

Second, process writing may be effective for some learners, but it is not a panacea for poor writing. The point here is that writers are human too, and as such, perform well under certain conditions and not as well under others. The instructional approach espoused and followed by the teacher constantly needs to be tempered by the needs, likes, learning styles, and writing skills of the students. To blindly follow one approach is bad pedagogy.

Third, students rarely are allowed to choose their own topics on university-level classroom writing exams. It is therefore in their best interest to require them to write on topics that are not necessarily of their own choosing or even of interest to them. Additionally, it may not be the place of the ESL writing teacher to prescribe values and ways of thinking. Instead, the teacher should provide encouragement to ESL students while attempting to motivate them to become better writers.

Fourth, the evaluation techniques employed in process-oriented courses fail to instill a realistic understanding of what to expect in actual university courses. These teachers focus on the messenger, not the message. This method stands in direct opposition to what university professors do when evaluating written responses. They could not care less if the students spend hours memorizing notes prior to a test. What matters is a written product upon which to base a grade.

Horowitz's concerns regarding process teaching did not go unnoticed among its advocates. Liebman-Kleine countered that writing-

across-the-curriculum projects have increased an awareness of the importance of process in writing (1986). She provided anecdotal evidence indicating that in her school and others where writing-across-the-curriculum programs are in use, academic teachers are requiring process-oriented activities.

In addition, she questioned the very nature of the process-product dichotomy, claiming it to be a false and unproductive one. Instead, she proposed that the process approach can be subdivided into many approaches, one of them being academic writing (i.e., product-oriented writing); after all, products can only be produced through the completion of a process. As for essay examination writing, Liebman-Kleine argued that it is not the job of the writing instructor to prepare students for every possible type of writing task. Time constraints limit how much can be accomplished. The best teachers can hope to do is provide students with enough strategies to enable them to successfully cope with the rigors of future academic writing assignments.

Hamp-Lyons (1986) agreed with much of Horowitz's argument, but took issue with his concern over the problem of the essay writing exam (as well as with other forms of academic writing). She explained that the purpose of process instruction is to develop a sense, an understanding, of processes. Since the product is dependent on the process, just as the process leads to the product, a better appreciation for processes will only facilitate the reaching of particular outcomes.

Finally, the current state of affairs can largely be seen as a period of compromise. For example, Connor (1987) notes that ESL is "moving toward an integrated theory of writing that includes both process and

product" (p.691). Hamp-Lyons urges process instructors to take into account the academic writing needs of students, and to synthesize the product and process approaches (1986). Raimes (1991) cautions against viewing the process/product controversy as an either/or issue. Instead she suggests that instruction include both how to use processes as writing tools and how to produce academically suitable products. Even Horowitz hedges his position concerning the issue when he writes: "By now it should be clear to everyone that neither view subsumes the other and that neither view can stand alone" (1986b, p.797).

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